

ADDRESS
ON VACATING THE PRESIDENCY
OF THE
ARCHÆOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF GLASGOW

*DELIVERED AT THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
15th NOVEMBER, 1894*

BY
JOHN FERGUSON, LL.D.
F.S.A. LOND. AND SCOT.
REGIUS PROFESSOR OF CHEMISTRY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

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[Delivered at the Annual General Meeting of the Society, held on 15th November, 1894.]

ONCE more, and for the last time as President, I have to offer you a most cordial welcome at the beginning of another session. I can only express the hope and the belief that, as the years come and pass, and as one office-bearer hands on the honours and duties to his successor, the Society will continue to flourish, and to command more and more influence in the line of research to which it is committed.

In my opening address I adverted to the vast domain of Archæology, and the necessity, not only of individual students, but even of societies, confining themselves to such topics of investigation as lie closest to their hands. For ourselves, it is not requisite to go from home for material to examine; the field of research in Scotland alone is far from being exhausted, the country teems with relics of a forgotten past: place names, legends, prehistoric remains, early literature, family history, ancient buildings, castles, houses, churches, monuments, personal relics, legal and other documents—there they are in great profusion for whoever will take the trouble to enquire about them.

It would be a work of much value, but of no small labour, to give a survey of all that has been done during the last two or three years to illustrate the antiquities of Scotland, by individuals and by the half-dozen and more Scottish antiquarian societies. There has been, I think, a broadening of the interest in the subject for some little time past. Besides works of great importance, such as the treatise on Domestic Architecture, the publications of the Historical Society, and of the Spalding Club, the Rhind lectures, editions of

early travels, and the papers which have appeared in Societies' transactions, there have been smaller books, specially dealing with the topography, the scenery and antiquities of particular places or districts, which, if not profound or exhaustive, but merely popular and amusing, still serve the all-important purpose of keeping the popular mind in touch with the past, and infusing into it the desire to preserve what still remains. A danger to which all remains of antiquity are exposed, is the ignorance of those who live beside them. The stones of Hadrian's Wall are converted into cow-houses; the rampart which marked the most northerly point of the Roman Empire is cut into to make the foundation for "a but and a ben;" in literal truth, the dust of imperious Cæsar is used to stop a hole to keep the wind away, and when the object of antiquity has been fairly wiped out, its disappearance is called improvement and progress, and is ascribed to the irresistible march of civilisation, when it is merely the result of ignorance or the childish or spiteful love of destruction. It is well that knowledge of the antiquities about us should be as wide-spread as possible. It is only by the weight of universal public interest in the preservation of objects of antiquity that these can be protected from the selfishness of individuals and the iconoclasm of certain classes, public companies and others. When once it is understood thoroughly that a monument of the past of any description, though it may, as property, be justly claimed by an individual, yet historically and archæologically belongs to the country at large, there is a greater chance of its being preserved. It may be that certain changes in Glasgow have been improvements; I am certain that others have not been, in all cases, absolutely necessary; anyhow, they have made the city so much the poorer. It will be well for this Society, which presumably has the interest of historic Glasgow specially at heart, to watch carefully alterations which may be suggested hereafter. There is hardly anything of an earlier Glasgow left; what little there is should now be jealously guarded.

I have no intention of presenting you with a review of recent progress in archæological discovery even in Scotland, still less in archæology as a whole. I must leave that and similar themes to those who have greater aptitude and more opportunities for treating them than I have. But, considering that it happens to have occurred during my tenure of office, I shall crave your

permission to make a few remarks upon what has been the most important local archæological event of the past year, namely the exhibition of relics of Old Glasgow recently closed. In every respect that exhibition was most valuable. In the first place, it brought to light the abundance of objects of all sorts which have outlasted their actual use and are kept in existence, rather as mementos of their owners, or as relics of different manners and conditions of life, or for the worth of their material, or for their own beauty, or curiosity, or rarity, than for any practical purpose they can serve now. One is glad to think that so much has survived, when the temptation is so great to discard old things to make way for new. One should take a lesson from Aladdin not to make the exchange without due consideration; old lamps may be preferable to new. In the second place, it revealed the strength as well as the weakness of Glasgow antiquities. The exhibits were, with very few exceptions, not earlier than 1600, and most of them were little more than a century old. Whatever, therefore, may have been the age of the foundation of Glasgow, it is certain that hardly anything survives of its early history. There were no pre-historic remains and hardly any Roman remains—if, indeed, the Romans ever were here—but even of times long subsequent to these there was nothing to show. What a waste and destruction there must have been of such relics, even though Glasgow never was the centre of revolutions and of social and race cataclysms! We can only explain their absence by believing that it was a very small place, and that the traces left by the former inhabitants were soon obliterated. Now that one has seen what can be brought together, one knows that there is little likelihood of making a collection similar to what one finds in districts or towns, where race has succeeded race, and one civilisation has superseded another. In the third place, one may try to hope, but, I fear, can hardly believe, that it has sufficiently impressed the inhabitants of this city as to make them take a greater interest in the past history of it, and of the people who lived in it and helped to build it up. But if it may have induced them to preserve anything, however trifling, which throws light on the manners and history of the past, the exhibition will not have been in vain.

A great danger to objects of antiquity arises from their isolation—and, by antiquity, I mean that of yesterday or of this morning, quite as much as of

three or four thousand years ago. Antiquity is not measured by years or centuries, so much as by desuetude and novelty, and things just going out of use are more likely to be destroyed than things of remoter periods. The age of steam-navigation, for instance, is to be counted as yet only by years and decades, but there are events in that branch of art and science which, so far as antiquity is concerned, might have been coæval with the canoes which were exhibited in "Old Glasgow." We *could* make canoes out of trees and ferry across the Clyde in them if we required, and engineers *could* build a steamer on the model of the Comet, but who would ever think of doing either one or other as a question of practice? The Comet is as extinct as the canoe, and we can apply the term Archaeology to steam-navigation as correctly as to the ships of the Vikings. An object is not antique because it is old, and an object is not modern because it is recent. The archæologist looks for more than mere age in the object under his notice, more than the lapse of centuries; he wants to find the human element in it, the human thought that designed it, the human energy and skill that wrought it out. Antiquity, in fact, is only an older or historical ethnography; the study of both of them is the necessary complement to the understanding of our own stage of civilisation, which is a part or the whole both in time and in place. The Stone Age in this country is long past, but it still exists in some islands of the South Seas. For us, therefore, a stone axe may be either of antiquarian or of ethnographic interest. A possible change in the habits or surroundings of these islanders might convert the stone tools of to-day into objects of no worth in their eyes to-morrow. Let them have the use of iron implements and those of stone would soon disappear. One can hardly suppose that such people would dream of preserving these implements; in fact, they would throw them aside and leave them to perish. They are not yet civilised enough to have the archæological taste for the preservation of objects out of use, and the skill to enable them to realise that the things of to-day are the antiquities of to-morrow. The older nations, however, have some appreciation of the value of things out of date. The most civilised peoples are always keenest in the improvement of their weapons of attack and defence; the old are discarded at once in favour of the newest, if these are better. The old, however, are not

entirely destroyed ; they are kept in armouries as illustrations of what have been the best under past conditions ; they are practical lessons in the history of invention. The Solomon islanders are not wise enough yet to see this.

The isolation, to which I have alluded, is a real and imminent danger to the existence of objects of antiquity. In very many, if not in most, cases, it is only by comparison of different objects that their meaning and value can be ascertained. Certainly only in that way can conclusions as to date, use, origin, and so on, be safely arrived at. But if objects are separated from one another, the connection is lost ; the mutual illustration cannot be obtained even by a person of skill. It may happen, too, that the possessor may not know the intrinsic value of the object in his hands, and still less the comparison-value. Moreover, it is difficult to preserve a few odd relics of a generation older than our own, and such things are neglected and ultimately disappear, it is difficult to say how ; often simply by neglect.

One of the lessons of the recent Exhibition, as of all such exhibitions, is the importance of collocation. Only by that method can light be thrown on many obscurities. In no department of the Exhibition was this element lacking. It was pre-eminently seen in the various views and plans of the city. It was conspicuous even in the portraits which were executed by the same artist. One knows that it was once the fashion to despise archæological study, and light contempt still dwells in a few uncultured minds, and the sneer still forms on a few uncivilised visages, at the interest in things out of date and out of use which all rational people entertain. But these condemn themselves ; they themselves make a distinction between the earlier and later works of an artist, for example ; they recognise the difference between the first attempts and those when the master has reached the maturity of his powers. They can tell when decadence sets in and the work is no longer so powerful or so good. Even, therefore, in the life-time of a living worker in whatever field—art, science, literature, technology—there is an archæology. For the worker himself his past execution is as much beyond his capacity to repeat, as if it had belonged to another. He may have outgrown it, or he may have fallen behind it, but the later work will be different from the earlier—simply by time and its influences. The individual, not otherwise than the race as a whole, lives by and through the past.

In my former address I indicated the importance of an Archæological Museum for Glasgow, a place where isolated objects that run the chance of destruction, as well as collections, could be preserved for future generations of citizens to see and study. The recent Exhibition has come most unexpectedly to back up by a practical illustration what I then said. It has shown that there is no lack of material as a nucleus for such a collection. I believe that many persons, who have objects of curiosity and value, would be pleased to have them safely housed and preserved in a regular "Old Glasgow" Museum. That it would be of permanent interest to the citizens I have little doubt; of much greater interest than a Museum of Natural History. It would have the advantage of further illustrating what they already know. The portraits of men and women, known only by name, make the history of Glasgow live again; the pictures and views recal familiar scenes now past to those who have beheld them, and enlighten those of a younger generation as to the appearance of the city and its surroundings before inevitable change came over them. There was no more interesting section of the Exhibition than the collection of views. In considering these, one could understand how visitors to the city, a few generations back, always expressed such admiration at its appearance; my belief is that the admiration would be renewed if those who are responsible for the well-being of the city and its inhabitants would exert themselves to give the citizens a purer atmosphere. If I may judge by what I have seen, a Glasgow museum would have most important educational effects. The museum of Old Paris is to the Parisian evidently of the greatest possible interest. When I visited it again, about a couple of months ago, it was as before crowded with visitors. There are, of course, relics and records there, that could never be paralleled here under any circumstances, for Paris is a place of very great antiquity, the capital of a great country, and is full of history and historical remains of all kinds from the earliest dawn down to the last revolution. One can understand the intense curiosity felt in such a collection by those who are now denizens of the place, where the events connected with them have occurred; events, too, of which in these last days many must have been eye-witnesses. It stirs the imagination undoubtedly, and keeps alive an enthusiasm for the place, and a pride in its citizenship which is of the utmost importance as a factor in social and municipal life. It is proverbial

how devoted the Parisian is to Paris—the proverb, as far as Glasgow is concerned, is, I fear, just the reverse.

I hope that it may be within the power of some one who occupies this chair to do something to bring to a practical issue the design for a permanent “Old Glasgow” Exhibition.

While there is much satisfaction in the retrospect of this Exhibition, and in thinking of the stimulus it may have given to a fuller account than anything we have of literary and artistic Glasgow, there is at the same time not wanting a shadow over its close and over our Society. One of those who had most skill in the material for such an exhibition, who gave his knowledge and time and labour ungrudgingly to it, and who did as much as he could to make the Exhibition as successful as it proved to be, has been taken away from among us.

Mr. John Guthrie Smith, of Glasgow connection and of Glasgow life, was also of the select band who are most deeply interested not only in its present welfare and prosperity, but equally so in its past history, and in the people who have given it character. Of Mr. Smith, as a public man and as a man of business, it would be out of place here to speak; we are concerned with him as an antiquary, and especially as a Glasgow antiquary. Though his special knowledge was of Glasgow people—their genealogies and biographies—and his knowledge was turned to account on more than one occasion, his archæological tastes were catholic, and he had a feeling for antiquity in whatever guise it presented itself. To see the work, however, which he was capable of executing, one must turn to his book on Strathblane. The minute detail, involving long research and the most careful scrutiny of facts and dates, the correction of others’ errors, and the verification of authorities, shows that he carried strict business methods into his literary work, and that he was as scrupulous about the accurate deciphering of an inscription as he would have been in drawing up a balance-sheet.

It would not be just, however, to imply that it was a mere piece of painful collecting. It is much more—it is a readable and attractive story, full of human interest; for though its immediate concerns are centred in a small area, these stretch out numberless threads, which entangle it with and bind it to the

history of the country at large. Properly restricting it to being a history of Strathblane, its author was too skilful to close his eyes to its wider aspects, and thus to give it a greater value as a chapter of the past history of Scotland. A book such as this, is emphatically a labour of love. The pains he took with it, the time he spent over it, could not have been done to order for any publisher, and could never have been recompensed by any payment—the doing of the work was its own reward. The book was elaborated as we see it, because it was in the man's nature to be thorough and conscientious; nothing would be left unfinished so long as he could make it perfect, and his book on Strathblane will remain a standard one on that district, when the objects described have perhaps vanished away, when the families concerned have become extinct; when changes have come about which, in these days of railways and whatever other mode of locomotion may hereafter supersede railways, no one can foresee. Mr. Smith's book will be hereafter one of the most important treasure-houses to the antiquary of future years, who will prize the multitudinous facts and details which the author has so carefully and with such prescience preserved.

It is known that at his death Mr. Smith had made much progress with another work on the neighbouring district of Strathendrick. It is some consolation to think that much of it, having been completed, is in fit state for printing, and that the author's labours will not be lost. Nevertheless the work, however complete, that comes to us from the hands of another than its author, is hardly a living book—it wants the final impress of the thoughts that called it into being. One is not quite sure that what has been printed is just in the last form which the author himself would have given it. We must, however, be grateful that so much survives, but we may also truly regret that the possibility of much more has been carried away with such startling suddenness into the impenetrable darkness.

Mr. Smith is not the only blank in our membership that has to be mourned. One of our past presidents has also been removed from us, and in him, not only have we lost a member who showed the warmest interest in the Society, but the loss is far wider, for the Border country may lament that its son who in these years knew it and loved it best, has been “wede away.” Professor Veitch was imbued with the greatest enthusiasm for Scottish history, for

Scottish legendary lore, for Scottish poetry. His antiquarian tastes were not those of the mere critical student of the remaining records of an early age, not those of the archæologist, for whom a church or a castle presents questions of style and date and architectural anomalies which may interest him technically, but such monuments attracted him for the bygone life of which they were the mouldering remains. He saw the romance and the poetry of the Border; he was under the spell of it much in the same way as Scott, and Hogg, and Wilson, and Leyden, and even Wordsworth fell under it. The turmoil of the past, the fighting days of the border tribes, the later times of the persecutions, the terrible tragedies enacted in the gentlest of natural scenes, the pathos of the partings told in story and in verse, were more to him than even the mere accuracy of the histories themselves. It would not be correct to say that he was an archæologist because he was a poet, but, no doubt, his archæology was so steeped in humanity as it was by his poetical feeling and deep sympathy. If he could investigate critically a historical and philological question, he could also throw the mantle of imagination over the bare outlines of antiquity. It seems natural and fitting, therefore, that while his own poems turn mostly on the legends and remains of the Border, his critical and descriptive works are devoted to the history and poetry of the Border and its connection with the natural scenery and bygone life of that part of the country.

But, whatever view we take of such a question, there is no doubt that our meetings will be poorer by the absence of Professor Veitch. Whether one agreed with his speculations and deductions or not, mattered but little; there was an enthusiasm in all he said; there was an infectious glow of love for Scotland, and its scenery, and its poetry and history, which made up for all else; and there was the touch of pathetic regret at the changes which time had wrought over all—the lonely border tower, the hill fort, the grassy mound, where rest the last remains of great and forgotten heroes and warriors—which showed the kindly heart that was beating under the somewhat massive exterior. When at his best, no man was fuller of anecdote both of personal experience and from reading. No one was better skilled in the history of South Scotland, and had more thoroughly caught its spirit—and now all that rich store is lost to us for ever. I think we may be proud that we were

able to enrol among our Presidents a man like Professor Veitch, and I hope that the Society will always be able to command such service as he rendered it so unstintedly.

And now the time is come that I should restore to you the trust which you did me the honour to repose in me. As far as has lain in my power I have tried to discharge the duty required, I hope, with no regret on your part, that I have had it to do. If I am conscious of failures, I am also aware of much forbearance and goodwill, for which I thank you most gratefully.

For myself, I shall look back with the greatest pleasure and pride to having been thought worthy of your confidence, and to having occupied this chair; alas! that my having done so should now have become a piece of my own personal archæology. Whatever I may have wished to do, or ought to have done, is no longer in my power; to use the last words spoken by Roger Bacon's famous brazen head: "Time is past." I have, however, one more duty to discharge, the last that falls to me as your President: it is to propose my successor. Apart from being senior Vice-President, there is no one upon whom the office could be more fitly bestowed than upon one who has worked actively and well for the Society in all sorts of ways, and who has, besides, the qualification of being out and out a Glasgow man—by descent, birth, residence, sentiment, and of being deeply interested in the city itself, its people, history, and antiquities.

I am sure you will all respond heartily to the recommendation of the Council, that the next President be Mr. Colin Dunlop Donald. And so having discharged all my duties, I resign the chair to him, and bid you all a regretful farewell.

